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Abstract

How are deaf students who choose to seek employment after leaving high school prepared for the world of work? Do they have the basic, everyday readiness skills necessary to compete? Have the families, school systems, vocational rehabilitation and the community worked together effectively enough to to ensure success for the student? Legislation requires that the student have an individualized program and that collaborative efforts occur among the parties involved. But does that happen? The author proposes some practical hands-on techniques for putting the mandates of current legislation into practice to further greater success for the student entering the workforce.

For the deaf student who will seek employment after completing high school, life ahead will present some unknown challenges (Allen, Rawlings & Schildroth., 1989; Danek & Busby, 1997). Unfortunately, family members, school guidance counselors, transition specialists, rehabilitation counselors and private service providers alike are often unaware of the myriad of opportunities as well as the many pitfalls the job-seeker will face. To complicate matters, the system designed to provide supports to the student can be very cumbersome and not at all consumer-friendly. The challenge for the student is to prepare for employment and to do what it takes to maintain employment. The challenge for the adults is to make this possible. This paper will describe two specific areas in which preparation for the world of work is needed: pre-employment/independent living skills and use of community resources. By determining the student's real life readiness for work in pre-employment/independent living skills and subsequently establishing workable linkages using community resources, the student can be better prepared to meet the future.

Current legislation requires that the transition process to prepare students with disabilities for adult life should begin at age 14. Although this may be happening according the the mandates of Individuals with Deisabilities Education Act (PL105-17), we need to look at what is being done from a practical standpoint. What is happening to ensure that all parties are working together providing the integrated, ongoing supports that are needed for success? The goal is to provide the student with the basics skills necessary to survive in the adult world of work, not just to follow the mandates of the law.

In a study on employment attainments of deaf adults, 53% were

unemployed one year after graduation (Macleod-Gallinger, 1992). Because preparation for employment begins early for most individuals through incidental learning, time is of the essence for the deaf student. Most deaf students miss out on that incidental learning that hearing people take for granted. For example, when asked, "Are you paid hourly?", one deaf student replied, "I am paid every two weeks." The student did not understand that the question related to the hourly wage and not the frequency of the paycheck. Another student, working a weekend job, returned from her half-hour lunch break, two hours late. When she returned, she asked why no one came to get her after 30 minutes. She did not understand that it was her responsibility to return to work at the end of the half-hour lunch break. These are not unusual examples and they can have serious consequences for deaf students in the work place. If appropriate steps for preparing for work are postponed until near graduation, opportunities for success are greatly reduced or for all practical purposes almost non-existent (Wright, 1989). Therefore early intervention is crucial.

At this juncture, it is necessary to clarify the population about whom we are discussing. Generally, deaf students who pursue employment after leaving high school, as opposed to post secondary education, are those that fall into the category of the "lower achieving deaf person" (Reiman, Bullis & Davis, 1991). These individuals can often be characterized by the following areas of difficulty:

- insufficient social/interpersonal skills resulting from inadequate education and limited family support
- vocational weaknesses resulting from inadequate training experiences, and changes in personal/work situations
- problems in behavioral, emotional, and social adjustment
- independent living skills weaknesses
- educational weaknesses
- secondary disabling conditions (Reiman et al., 1991).

A National Task Force on Low-Functioning Deaf Adults indicates that "this group may be able to achieve higher levels of vocational, social and personal adjustment with appropriate interventions" (Bullis, Davis, Bull & Johnson, 1995, p. 137). It is those interventions we will discuss here using informal, but practical techniques that have been developed at Developmental Services Group, Inc. in Maryland have evolved over the past 10 years. The interventions and techniques are not meant to be all-inclusive. The intent of this paper is to present some functional, hands-on techniques which can be used by parents and educators alike to determine a student's readiness for the world of work. In addition, some practical suggestions will be made describing ways to create workable linkages by

fostering awareness of community resources and encouraging partnerships among all parties involved in the student's life.

A. The Student

Using the Competencies and Foundation skills cited in Danek and Busby's, *Concepts and Premises in Transition Planning and Programming - Empowerment Through Partnership* (1997), family members, school guidance counselors, transition specialists, rehabilitation counselors and private service providers can observe in day-to-day activities if the student has some basic readiness skills necessary for success on the job.

Throughout the transition process, the parties involved in the student's life should be determining if the student can independently perform the following basic tasks:

COMPETENCIES

Knowledge of resources (time, money, materials)
Can the student:

- set and use a vibrating or flashing alarm clock?
- wake up with an alarm clock and without adult reminders?
- attend appointments independently and on time?
- plan, shop for and prepare a simple meal?
- plan a project with time, money and materials (build a shelf, plan a party, etc.)?
- open a bank account?
- deposit/withdraw money independently from a bank account?
- use the yellow pages to find a hearing aid dealer, auto body shop, etc.?
- locate an interpreter service in the telephone book?
- explain an individual's rights when using an interpreter?

Interpersonal skills (teamwork, negotiating, teaching, awareness of others' needs)
Can the student:

- resolve a minor personal conflict independently with a non-signing hearing person?
- write a note to request a day off of work from a supervisor?
- reschedule a medical appointment?

- approach a worker in a store or restaurant and ask a question about a product?
- teach classmates how to perform a favorite hobby?

Information (evaluating data, organization, processing, using computers) Can the student:

- read job advertisements and find job titles that match areas of interest?
- analyze job advertisements for salary, benefits, hours of work, duties, location?
- compare and contrast the purchase two different brands of a product (e.g., backpack)?
- demonstrate how to use a simple word processing program on a computer?

Systems (understanding social, organizational, and technological systems) Can the student:

- explain the requirements and steps for obtaining a job at the Post Office?
- describe how to obtain Social Security benefits?
- map a route on the local bus or transit system?
- explain the function of the relay operator?

Technology (knowing equipment & tools, maintaining & troubleshooting) Can the student:

- set up a TTY (answer mode, flashing light, printer paper, etc.)?
- use a TTY to make a phone call/long distance call/leave a message?
- troubleshoot problems with the TTY after a power outage?
- use the relay service to make a call/leave a message on an answering machine?
- use different models of TTYs?
- perform basic functions on a PC (turn on monitor and computer, print a document, etc.)?
- follow directions to install a video game on a PC?
- describe where and how often to get automobile maintenance?
- purchase and pump own gasoline?

FOUNDATION SKILLS

Basic skills (reading, writing, arithmetic, and listening)
Can the student:

- add a column of five numbers?
- perform single digit multiplication?
- subtract dollar amounts in a check register?
- read and explain articles from the front page of the newspaper?
- give written directions to home?
- file alphabetically/numerically?
- make change for five dollars in coins and paper money?

Thinking skills (ability to learn, to reason, to think creatively, make a decision)
Can the student:

- explain logically reasons why a particular job is appealing?
- watch a movie or television show and explain the job duties of the characters?
- explain the steps necessary to achieve a specific job/personal goal?
- tell a joke?

Personal qualities (responsibility, self esteem, self-management, sociability)
Can the student:

- list assets and limitations of self?
- set and keep medical appointments?
- maintain eye contact when communicating?
- use different modes of signing considering the reader's ability to comprehend?

If the student is unable to perform any of the above tasks, interventions can be instituted to correct the deficiencies when possible prior to the student's leaving school. All of these items should be approached pragmatically, taking into consideration safety, confidentiality and medical issues.

B. Coordination of Community Resources

In order to foster partnerships and awareness of community resources all parties must play a role (family members, school guidance counselors, transition specialists, rehabilitation counselors, private service

providers and businesses). The literature and practical experience suggests that transition linkages between special education and rehabilitation are often weak. When this is the case, the student may not be aware of how to access community resources even though the resources may be readily available. In addition, parental involvement is often discouraged by teacher attitudes (Danek & Busby, 1997). Parents are the primary contact with the student after graduation; therefore parental involvement is crucial and should be encouraged. The following is a list of general suggestions to encourage more workable linkages:

1. **Flow chart of post high-school funding and services:** The "system" for obtaining services and funding after leaving school can be cumbersome and confusing to even the most knowledgeable parent or educator. Danek and Busby (1997) suggested that the "adoption of a philosophy that recognizes the leadership role of schools in the transition process will help ensure a seamless transition into adulthood." In keeping with that idea, the transition specialist or guidance counselor is the ideal person suited to know and understand the system of resources available to the student at the completion of school. Ideally, school personnel or vocational rehabilitation counselors should present the student and family members with a flow chart of services and funding sources available in that home state or region. This flow chart could be presented to parents as early as when the student is age 14, thereby providing the families with ample time to understand and investigate their options.

2. **Home visits:** The IDEA (P.L.105-17) and other legislation (P.L.99-457) initiated the concept of providing special education services to children with special needs beginning from birth. For deaf children, that involved the education of family members, too, including early education in the home. What happens to that important family contact when the student enters middle school or high school? Is it any less important to have that contact with the home during the crucial adolescent years? Developing ongoing relationships with families of deaf students can have long lasting impact on the students relationships with the educational system (Allen, et al., 1989). So, too, parental involvement is vital in all aspects of the student's life during the adolescent and young adult years (Long, 1990). It is this author's experience that visits to the home of the young adult can increase family awareness and therefore the potential for success. It is likely that home visits may provide those working with the individual a more realistic picture of the individual's challenges and opportunities. For example, what are the socioeconomic, cultural/ethnic, geographic, family dynamics that affect the

student? How does the family communicate with the student? What is the primary language used in the home? Home visits can also ensure that adaptive equipment is able to be used appropriately. Often student's families will purchase a TTY, and fail to know they need to purchase a flashing light. Or the student may be very familiar with the TTYs used at school, but the one purchased at home could be very different. How does this affect the student? He or she may be unable to contact friends, employers or make emergency calls. Who will ensure that the student can make full use of the home TTY? Most schools for the deaf have a family education department with staff who travel. And many public schools have initerant teachers who travel. An occasional home visit by one of these staff people can resolve a simple issue that often gets complicated.

3. **Social connections:** "All work and no play..." Most people need friends. Young deaf adults are no exception. After leaving school, however, their options for a social life, especially for those living in remote areas, can be little to none (Vernon & Andrews, 1990). This lack of friends is detrimental to normal adult maturation. At schools for the deaf as well as public schools, students often ride a school bus with other deaf students from their home area. Parents see familiar faces at the bus stop, but may not make a firm social contact with that family. While the student is still in school parents are often not aware of the limited social life their deaf family member may experience after leaving school. The schools and rehabilitation personnel may be the only entities that are aware of this connection. Without breaching confidentiality, it may be advantageous, in some situations, for the professionals to encourage the individual or the family members to continue a social connection when school is completed, thereby reducing the social isolation often experienced by young deaf adults after they leave school.

4. **Job Simulations/Job tryouts:** Though this particular technique is often left to vocational programs, it is extremely helpful to consider conducting job simulations or job tryouts as early as age 15 or 16, while the student is still in school and has the opportunity to consider other job options. This is analagous to someone, who is preparing for a professional career, participating in a semester internship. For example, a student wants to work masonry construction after leaving school. The student may have performed excellently in shop class, but what does the real world bring? Perhaps this student knows something of the real world as a result of a part time job in a fast food restaurant. But the construction business is quite different from a fast food restaurant. More often than not, the student will

initially be relegated to performing the "dirty" work for the construction crew and will not be doing the actual masonry work. Not to mention that the student will be working in extreme weather conditions and earning irregular paychecks during certain seasons. How many students are prepared for this reality and how many family members are willing to accept having their deaf "child" endure these "hardships?" In some situations the individual in this job setting may become frustrated, give up and discount masonry as a career option all together. A job simulation or job tryout, in the student's job of choice, will provide a more realistic picture of what the duties of that job entails. And the employer can receive the same benefits. Some employers may not be aware that a deaf person can perform certain job tasks; therefore the job simulation/job tryout may provide the employers with knowledge about what a potential employee has to offer.

5. **Career Day:** Many students express their interest in careers such as beautician, nursing assistant, or construction trades. Prior to participating in a job simulation or job tryout, it may be beneficial for the student to meet someone who does that kind of job. This can be accomplished through a career day or guest speaker series at school. Another way is simply to contact someone in the local business community and ask questions about their particular job (training required, salary, job opportunities, etc.). Students can do this as a homework assignment. Or family members may want to make the inquiry for their own knowledge in helping to guide their student to make career decisions. Again, not only will this benefit the student, but can give the business community the exposure to students who are interested in particular occupations and open up potential career positions.

6. **The Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor:** The vocational rehabilitation (VR) counselor is mandated to be a part of the transition process from the outset. Family members and/or the student can enhance chances for success by initiating and maintaining contact with the counselor throughout the high school years. The counselor's role, after the student leaves school, is one of support to the individual in finding and keeping employment. This can include diagnosis and evaluation, providing training, purchasing equipment, making referrals to appropriate support services, and providing other services. Though the Vocational Rehabilitation counselor is a valuable resource, in many areas of the country, there are no counselors who know American Sign Language. In addition, given current caseload numbers in the hundreds, it is not always realistic to expect that the VR counselor can meet with the individual to resolve on-the-job problems.

Therefore a referral to a private agency, if available, may be made. The VR counselor and the agency will then work together to try to ensure successful employment outcomes.

7. **The Job Coach:** Job Coaches are generally contracted from private non-profit agencies by the state vocational rehabilitation counselor to provide more one-on-one support on the job. Though the job coach can play a vital role in providing that support, it is not necessarily the job coach's role to train the individual in the independent living skills which may be needed for success. Additionally, because job coaching is a relatively new field and does not yet have professional standards, job coaches are often not much older than the individual, and because they may lack experience, may be unfamiliar with the nuances of the particular job in which the individual is working. In many areas, there are no "signing" job coaches available at all (Muth, 1995). Early teamwork involving the vocational rehabilitation counselor, job coaching agency, the school and the business community should address some of the possible problems while the student is in school, before these problems become detriments to the individual on the job.

8. **Private vocational programs:** Just as the college-bound student may visit Gallaudet or other college campuses prior to graduation from high school, so too, school personnel, students and families could benefit from visits to the local private service providers. In doing so the parent or student can see first hand what the programs have to offer and ask questions to determine which program is a suitable match for services.

9. **Hearing high school classroom:** If students are to compete for jobs with their hearing peers, it is imperative they know their "competition." Teachers as well could benefit from this exposure. Working in special education, teachers may lose sight of what students in other schools are able to accomplish (Blalock, 1996). Ideally, visits by deaf students to hearing high school classrooms or extracurricular activities could occur as an regular event throughout the high school years. Partnerships may develop out of these visits: for example, participation by deaf and hearing students together on school projects, clubs or community service activities. This joint participation may provide the hearing students with more awareness of the abilities of the deaf student, as well as providing the deaf student with additional contacts for future employment opportunities in the hearing world.

10. **Community outreach:** In order to make the business community aware of the potential that deaf students have as employees, it is necessary

find creative ways to provide the employers with this information. In addition to job simulations/tryouts and visits to businesses, another technique is to provide outreach to the businesses themselves. This may mean offering mini sign language classes to local companies, involving a business in sponsorship of a school sports team or theater group. One group of students volunteered to work as a support team when a private business had employees participating in a charity walk-a-thon. By inviting members of the business community to be involved with the school and having students work side-by-side with the employees, opportunities for business partnerships and employment opportunities are increased.

Conclusion

In conclusion, transitioning from school to work can be a confusing and frightening prospect for the student and family members. To ensure greater success, transitioning initiatives, including all parties (family members, school guidance counselors, transition specialists, rehabilitation counselors, private service providers, and businesses), must start in the early years and continue. This author proposes practical, hands-on methods be used during the process of transition to increase the student's likelihood for success, such as determining a student's real life readiness for work and establishing workable linkages using community resources.

For Additional Information

To locate additional information and research on this topic, there is ample literature available. Cited in the references and additional readings are publications on providing successful career and independent living interventions for low-functioning deaf adults, valuable assessment tools, research documentation, and articles demonstrating the importance of collaborative efforts. The reader is encouraged to pursue the valuable research and formal assessment techniques that have been developed for this population (for example, Bullis Reiman & Davis, 1990).

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Additional Readings

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